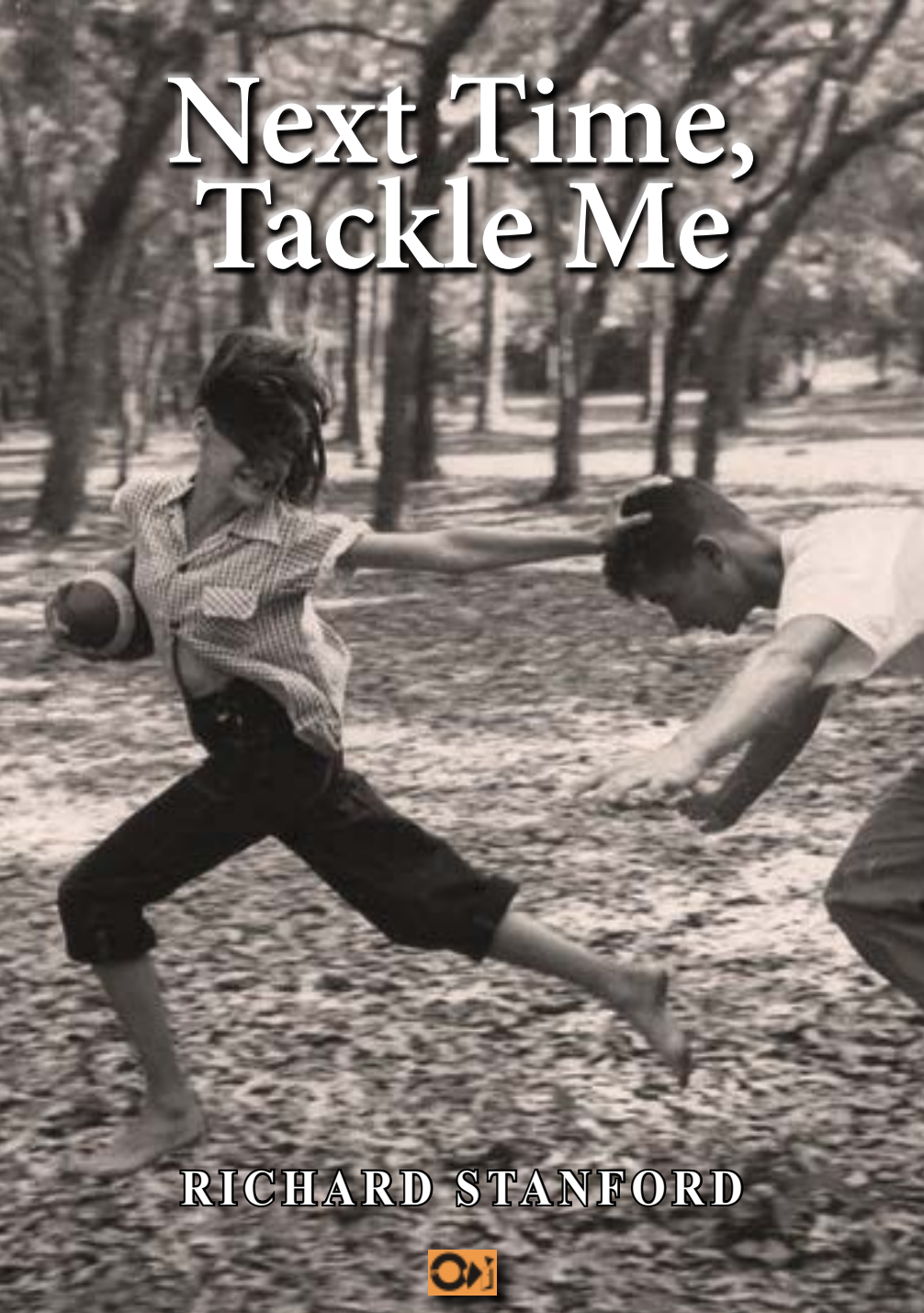
Next Time, Tackle Me



RICHARD STANFORD

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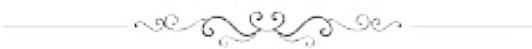

Next Time, Tackle Me

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We go to cemeteries to retrace our steps, to retrace our memories, to retrace in our minds the faces of the people we once knew. I have come to this cemetery that rises in a gentle slope from the banks of the Châteauguay River to retrace my own steps taken many years before. They were the steps I took alongside my friends as we carried a coffin up the slope to bury our friend. As I stand at this same graveside now, I retrace.

It was the summer of 1958. Blistering heat and stinging dust. I stood at the top of a hill looking down a rutted dirt street and beyond that a fast-flowing river. There was nothing much else around except for a bungalow – my new home – an apple orchard, and more dust and dirt than I had ever seen. I had come to the end of civilization.

I wasn't built for this. I was a city boy who had walked to school along a railway line with factories and the aromas of oil and steel wafting up my nostrils. The homestretch took me through a farmers market then across Hochelaga Street to my school. This was the east end of Montréal and up until three days ago it was the only home I had ever known.

My family and I had moved to this subdivision outside the village of Châteauguay, Québec. The small brick bungalow was the only house built so far and if there were more planned there was little evidence of them. It didn't bother me to have moved nor did I miss my school or my friends back in the east end. Over the course of my eleven years I had grown accustomed to leaving people behind. By the age of three I had already gone through two sets of parents, put up for adoption at four days of age in 1947, sent to an orphanage, then a foster home, and back to the orphanage. Finally, I was adopted in 1950. As it turned out my adoptive parents were wanderers, too; wandering when they found me. I was now eleven years old and working on my third set of parents. Home was a temporary notion and until the day I met Gordie I never had any reason to remember anyone.

Once we settled into our home, I set out to explore and seek relief from the heat. I biked down the dirt track to the Châteauguay River, found a gentle slope on the shoreline and waded in. The current pulsed against my legs, the water cold and clear. The opposite bank seemed a mile off, but it was actually only half that. Downstream was a railway bridge and beyond it the river continued to places unknown to me. Over the next several days I biked alongside the river, upstream and down. I crossed a bridge in Châteauguay Village and rode along the opposite bank where farmers' fields stretched in long slender swaths of corn and hay. At certain junctures the river narrowed, churning over rocks, the water frothing into rapids; in other places it flowed serenely in a silent current.

The heat was relentless and I was desperate to find someplace to swim. I went downstream towards a train bridge and when I got there a freight train was rumbling over it. Like a good Canadian kid, I waved at it.

"What are you waving at it for? There ain't anybody on it."

Startled, I turned to see a boy of about my age smiling at me. On his head was a white sailor's cap with Sea Scouts written across the black silk band.

"You're new here, ain't y'a?"

My sojourns along the river had not gone unnoticed.

"You swim? Good, wanna come out with us?" he said pointing down to a jetty where a lifeboat was anchored. The boat was swarming with about a dozen young boys all sporting the white sailor caps, sneakers, shorts and T-shirts. The boy, whose name was Ross, led me down to the boat where boys were coiling ropes, unfurling a sail, raising the oars and lacing up their lifejackets. I was greeted by the sole adult of the group, who fittingly went by the name of Skip. He wore thick glasses, his face was bronzed from wind and sun and he had an avuncular manner about him. He looked me up and down then asked me my age.

"Well, you're a little young for Sea Scouts but as long as you don't get seasick, c'mon aboard."

I was issued a lifejacket and the boat cast off. In perfect unison six boys, three each on the starboard and port sides, began to row until the boat passed under the railway bridge. Once on the other side four boys raised the mast and locked it into place. The sail was unfurled and the wind took us downriver. Skip was at the helm. I had no idea where we were going but I didn't much care.

I couldn't help but notice one of the boys in particular. He was hopping on his left leg while the other dangled limply, swaying at the knee wherever his motion or the wind took it. He used the dangling leg to pivot, or hooked it around a rope to keep his balance. With the help of his left leg he remained upright and moved forward with alacrity. It was astonishing to me that he could make his way around a pitching and rolling boat without fear. He did everything the other boys did. He hopped along the narrow deck, mere inches from the edge as the boat swayed. The other boys took no notice of him, seemingly unconcerned that he might stumble over the gunwale into the water. Suddenly he stopped what he was doing and looked at me. The boys went quiet. Apparently they were not indifferent to him after all. He seemed to hold an unspoken rank among them. His chocolate-coloured eyes glared at me, his blonde crew-cut hair sparkled in the sunlight. He hopped over and sat next to me.

"You come here often?" he said smiling. He was wearing shorts that showed his good leg ribbed with muscles was three times the size of mine. "Ross says your name's Nicholas. We're going to have to change that, right Ross?"

Ross nodded.

"There's nothing wrong with my name. I happen to like it. What's yours?"

"Gordie."

"Okay, so that's short for Gordon. Big deal."

"You wanna know my real first name. Seward! The short of that? Sewer! Who names their kid Seward? Don't worry, I'll go easy on you."

I'll go easy? So he gets to decide? In addition to going through three sets of parents, I was already into my second name. When I was adopted, my parents wanted to give me a whole new life in every way so they changed my name to Nicholas. They never told me what my birth name was but my father said: "It sounded like you were named by an orderly."

A few minutes later the craft reached the mouth of the Châteauguay River and I saw the largest body of water I had ever seen. It may have been only Lac St.Louis but to me it looked like the ocean. The wind blew from every point on the compass – not in gusts, but steadily, as though from a fan, churning up the water into whitecaps. Two boys, Brian and Larry, were hauling the mainsail, shouting "Boom coming over," as they swung it from port to starboard. I ducked just in time.

Skip set a course to the centre of the lake then west towards a small island. We dropped anchor just offshore from a sandy beach. All the boys stripped down to their bathing suits and jumped into the water. I never thought to bring mine along.

"You better get in, son," said Skip. "Don't worry. It's not deep. We'll fish you out."

I stripped down to my underpants and dived in. The shock of cold water hit me like a punch in the gut. In the city I only swam in indoor pools so the tickling of seaweed and the odours of fish were new sensations. Skip waved me over to the boat.

"You want to be part of this crew?"

Did I! A crew! Suddenly civilization did not seem so far away.

By the time we sailed back to the mouth of the Châteauguay River the wind was calm. Skip ordered six of the crew started rowing upstream. I would get my turn on an oar in ten minutes. Gordie sat beside me. "You want to know how I got this?" he said pointing to his leg dangling over the gunwale.

Three years ago, he told me, he had contracted polio, the pandemic scourge of the era. He spent six

months in an iron-lung. But the virus destroyed the nerves in his right leg and the muscle tissue atrophied. The doctors wanted to amputate but Gordie wouldn't let them. "I'd rather have a bum leg than none at all."

Gordie and I did our turn on the oars and we rowed upstream to the jetty. After packing up the sailing gear the gang of us walked to our bicycles and I saw Gordie tread on dry land. He hopped in a steady pace, using his right leg as a fulcrum. The leg went rigid at the knee then he pushed off with the left then hopped a full step. He repeated this action without hesitation. But in the millisecond when his left leg was in mid-step he was suspended in mid-air, free-floating. It was remarkable to see Gordie not so much hop but hover without attachment to the earth, the sense of exhilaration he must have felt to be tied to the earth in one second and being free of it the next. None of the other boys waited for Gordie to catch up – he was always alongside you or even leading the way. Riding a bicycle was a simple adaptation: he laid his right leg on the cross bar, pedaled with his left and kept pace with everyone.

As he rode off, Gordie shouted back to me: "Seey'a tomorrow Niki!"

Niki? You've got to be kidding.

With my new moniker, I spent the rest of the summer on that boat and became friends with Gordie, Brian, Larry and Ross. Brian was Paul Bunyan-type with a thick barrelled chest; Larry was already a six-foot plank; and Ross was a dead ringer for Al Capone. I learned to sail the boat although to call her a sailing craft was a bit of a stretch.

Skip worked at the headquarters of a shipping insurance company located in the port of Montreal. On any given day, Skip knew the names of scores of ships out on the oceans, their destinations and the weather in which they were sailing. These ships were insured by his company and he had to know if they were sailing into a hurricane or a revolution. So when the Empress of Britain came into a Montreal dry-dock for refurbishing, Skip knew about it. The old lifeboats from the ship were scrapped and left in a yard to rot. Once Skip found that out, he backed his pick-up truck into the yard and loaded up one of the boats, the only one that still bore at least part of the name, *Empress,* on the bow. The Empress was not the Bluenose. It was made to keep people afloat, not to win races. She was impossible to sink and equally impossible to sail. She had no keel so when the

wind picked up and filled the sail she slid sideways. Despite her shortcomings as a sailboat, there was a peaceful feeling to being on a boat powered by the wind, silently pushing through water.

Like all kids' summers in an instant it was over. School began but instead of entering a block-long concrete monolith, I found myself in front of a single storey wooden building that looked like a horse stable. For some reason there was a chimney that towered a hundred feet above the roof. It may have been the first week of September but there was already smoke billowing from it. From heat and dust to this. It was going to be a long winter.

Larry, Ross, and Brian were Catholic so they went to school in the village. That left Gordie and me in this horse stable. It was actually a decent place with polished wood floors, walls of two feet thick oak beams and four huge windows that made the classrooms as bright as greenhouses. Each classroom was packed with books and plenty of blackboards. It seemed we eleven-year-olds had a lot to learn and write.

It was on one of these blackboards that the new teacher introduced herself. She had reached the third letter of her name when Gordie called out: "Oh teacher, I'm all tied up in knots!" Miss Maxwell

turned quickly with fire in her eyes and trained them on Gordie who had his right leg laying in front of him on his desk with a pencil propped between his toes as if he were about to write. In slow motion Miss Maxwell swooned to the floor. A student ran out for the nurse while I got some water. Gordie went to Miss Maxwell, who was not doing so well. When she came around she looked at Gordie's smiling face; she looked down to see his right leg twisted under him. She passed out again. When the nurse finally arrived she managed to get Miss Maxwell to her feet and guided her gingerly out the room. I thought for sure the principal was going to give it to Gordie but his reaction was muted. He shook his head and said, "Please Gordie, I'm running out of teachers here."

Miss Maxwell was transferred to another school and a replacement was found who was a little more familiar was Gordie's antics. She said to Gordie: "All right young man, let's get it over with." But the element of surprise was lost and Gordie would wait for another day. There seemed to be a silent belief among the teachers and the students that if you could not take Gordie as he was then you weren't right for this school. No one teased him or called him names; there were no 'accidently-on-purpose' trips in the hallway. He was treated like everyone else but he

also angrily rebuffed any offer of assistance or special treatment. I was to find that out on the football field.

When Gordie invited me to play football I thought he would be a coach or maybe a referee. I never anticipated that he would actually *play* in the game and as the quarterback no less. It was a well-groomed field beside Gordie's house. The grass was thick and the field was about half the size of a regular football pitch. Gordie lived with his Aunt Muriel and she watched the game from the patio with great delight. She was our sole cheerleader.

To call it a football game was stretching the point. Tackling was allowed but none of us wore helmets, opting instead for tuques or baseball caps. Depending on how many showed up, there were usually six to eight players to a side. At the snap of the ball everyone ran like hell down the field and whoever got open first got the pass – that is, *if* the quarterback could get it to him and *if* the receiver could catch it. The quarterback was given a five-steamboat count to get the ball away and if he didn't, he was fair game to be pursued and tackled. Gordie got to pick the teams and he did not pick me for his side. He chose Larry who at six foot tall was an easy target. Ross and Brian gave me what I thought would be a 'piece-of-cake' assignment covering Gordie.

"Watch him," said Ross. "He pivots real quick."

"Yeah, sure," I said with a dismissive flick of my hand.

"I'm tellin' y'a."

It must be kept in mind that we are not talking about the Green Bay Packers here but eleven and twelve-year olds. But we took our football seriously and when you were chased you had better run and when you were tackled it was with gusto.

Gordie had a quick release, getting a pass away by three steamboats and he threw with deadly accuracy, throwing strikes to his receivers every time. Finally, after watching Gordie throw strike after strike, he was now having difficulty finding an open receiver. At five steamboats I took off after him. He started to hop away from me, shouting to his teammates to come back for a shorter pass. I gained on him but in my head I was screaming: Pass it! Don't make me do this! I slowed just enough to let him pull away. I dove, missing him by a few feet, hit the turf, grateful but not for long. Gordie threw the ball away and with pure fury in his eyes he shouted, "Next time, tackle me!"

It was not until a few sequences later that Gordie's side regained possession. This time when I reached five steamboats I did not hold up but went after him full speed. You want to get tackled, you want to be like everyone else, I'll tackle you all right, I said to myself. When I got within five feet of him I lunged. In mid-air I watched helplessly as Gordie, using his bum leg to pivot, dodged in the opposite direction. My face hit the turf, my mouth filled grit and grass. Gordie completed the pass, turned to me and said: "Now wasn't that fun." For all his awkward hopping and dangling leg, Gordie was deceptive. You never really knew where he was going and that was the beauty of it. Who knows, maybe he could play for the Packers. Later in the game, which our side lost, I did tackle him a few a times and he loved it. He loved getting dirty, he loved the thrill of the game and but most of all he wanted to play – and be treated - like everyone else.

With the coming of winter it became harder for Gordie to make it to school. The snow and ice made it almost impossible for him to hop and because there was no sensation in his right leg there was a risk of frostbite. Gordie's desk was empty after the first snowstorm and stayed that way for a week. Our teacher asked me if I would bring him his homework.

Aunt Muriel greeted me at the door and I immediately heard Gordie's tell-tale hop-and-skip coming down the hallway. Rather than being despondent at the very thought of homework, Gordie was happy to see me and happier still that I had brought him his assignments. I soon discovered why.

His room was filled with books – books packed into shelves, on his night table, under the bed, stacked along the walls, scattered on the floor. There were maps on the walls, *National Geographic* maps, maps of the solar system, and a telescope at the window on a tripod pointing heavenward. As Gordie flipped through the pages of his assignments, I looked through the books on one of his shelves. These were real books, books that I had heard about but never read. Aside from school texts the extent of my reading was *The Hardy Boys* and *Mad* magazine. Gordie had *Treasure Island* and just about everything else written by Robert Louis Stevenson. He had *Gulliver's Travels, The Jungle Book, Kim, The Time Machine,* and many more.

"Have you read all these?"

"Yeah, most of them. If you want to read any, help yourself."

I took out *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea*.

Gordie told to me he could not attend school for a year after he had contracted polio and the only way that he survived the solitary existence that the disease had inflicted upon him was to read, to nurture a rich inner life of adventure and fantasy. Whatever the limitations Gordie had to battle in the outside world, here in his room there were no such constraints and he could travel along any road he imagined.

I spent a lot of time with Gordie over that winter, visiting him three or four times every week with his homework. We peered through his telescope at the Moon, Mars, Venus and the stars. He taught me to play chess and we talked about the books we were reading. One day Gordie said something that led me along a very different road.

"You and me are sorta the same," he said, completely out of nowhere.

"How's that?"

"Your parents left you, too."

It took me a few moments to grasp what he was saying. I knew his parents were not living in this house

but I never dared to ask why. As for my birth parents leaving me, I had never given it much thought. I figured there was one neuron in my head that held a long forgotten image of my birth parents standing at the window of the maternity ward looking down at me and saying, "Well, I guess that's it," and walking away. From my limited experience I had come to the conclusion that parents did a lot of walking away. Gordie told me of another.

"When I got out of the hospital with this…my father just sorta looked at me…stared…and he wouldn't talk to me. It went on for about a month… then one Saturday he walked out of the house. Haven't seen him since. It wasn't like I caught polio on purpose, you know."

"How long ago was that?"

"Three years."

"So you were born here."

"Oh yeah, room down the hall."

He flipped slowly through the folios of an atlas, his eyes flying over Russia, Tibet, China. If he was telling me all this then I felt free to ask more.

"Where's your mom?"

"Aunt Muriel tells me she's in some place to get some rest. I don't know what it is or where it is. She fell apart…she didn't know what to do with me…neither of them did. She stopped making supper, slept all the time…started drinking a lot. Half the time I couldn't understand what she was saying. So among other things I taught myself how to cook. You want a sandwich? I make a really good Dagwood."

"No thanks. Go on."

"Well, at first it was pretty tough for me. I didn't know how to walk with this thing. It wasn't until Aunt Muriel got here that I got out of bed and she taught me how to get around."

"Did she also teach you how to throw a football?"

He laughed, "In a way…she taught me how to shift my weight and pivot….guess it kinda worked."

I understood now what Gordie was getting at about our being the same. But there was a difference. Maybe my adoptive parents were rentals but I did live with them. But Gordie's parents had really walked out on him.

"Don't get me wrong," Gordie continued. "I love Aunt Muriel and she's good to me. But I don't know what's going to happen. And one day, this bum thing is going to fall off and I'm going to be fitted with a wooden leg, just like Long John Silver. Won't that be neat."

"You gonna get a parrot, too?"

He chuckled. "Yeah I'll get me one of those. But I'll also make sure I never treat anyone the way my parents did me."

Gordie possessed a maturity that was beyond anything I had ever seen in any person, young or old. It wasn't only his self-reliance or his willfulness. He had developed a deep inner life, a sanctuary where he could be whatever he wanted to be without impediment. His strength wasn't in denial but was an affirmation that, if anything, his bum-leg would allow him to do things differently from everyone else, that his life would be unique despite the handicap. I never detected anger in him or resentment and I think that's why the kids in school, in Sea Scouts, and on the football pitch respected and admired him. Kids saw what many adults did not.

It takes a millisecond for a memory to unfurl it-

self. A sound, a smell, a musical note, a dream is all it takes. It's happened to me many times, especially in a lobby of some kind or a banquet hall and suddenly a door bursts open. The unfurling begins. That is all it takes to change a life forever.

With my crew of Gordie, Larry, Brian and Ross, I spent the spring and summer of 1959 on (or in) the water, camping, biking, reading, peering at the stars through Gordie's telescope and just being what we were – a bunch of kids – until October 9th, 1959.

It was Friday night and we had wrapped up our Sea Scout meeting in the Memorial Hall of St.Andrew's United Church. I was waiting in the lobby for Ross and Brian to finish up and we would walk home together. Gordie had left already but not without trading in jabs and challenges leading up to the football game we were to play the next morning. Gordie of course led the challenge, promising to "cut you guys to ribbons" and "you'll be eating grass for lunch" before playfully slapping me on the shoulder and going out the doors with, "Seey'a."

"Ya, seey'a."

It had been about ten minutes since Gordie had left. Ross and Brian had come out and we were about

ready to head home when one of the Sea Scouts burst open the door to the lobby. The door smacked against the wall.

"Gordie's been hit! Gordie's been hit!" he shouted running into the hall.

We stood frozen until Skip came running out, shouting at us, "You boys stay here!"

We looked at each other. No way. We ran after Skip.

We followed him across the church grounds onto the road towards an incline to the railway tracks. People were running out of their houses. There was confusion, shouting, someone yelled, "Call the police!"

As we got closer I saw a dark form on the side of the road, a bicycle wheel spinning slowly, the spokes sparkling in the moonlight. Then I saw him. Motionless. His legs twisted around the handlebars. There was no blood. Skip knelt beside Gordie and whispered in his ear. He placed the palm of his hand on his neck. I stepped closer. "Gordie?"

Skip stood, placed his hand gently on my chest and said, "Go home, Nicholas."

"Get up, Gordie!" I said, half-expecting him to get up laughing, like he'd been tackled and this was all one big joke -Aha, fooled y'a again - like he wanted all of us to faint. "Get up, goddamn it!"

"Stop it!" Skip barked. "He's gone, Nicholas. He's gone"

"NO! He's our quarterback!"

"Go home," pleaded Skip

I felt as though I had sucked in an entire lungful of sawdust and was unable to expel it. Brian was crying. Ross and Larry were like me, trying desperately to comprehend this madness. The sirens were coming.

We stood together and watched as Gordie's body was placed gently on a stretcher and loaded into an ambulance. As I watched it disappear into the dark, I knew then that my years of being a kid were over. Nothing would be the same again. I looked at the twisted bike and the front wheel turning slowly. Inside, for the first time in my life, I felt seething rage.

Who does this? Who leaves a kid to die on the side of the road? He was out there somewhere, in this very town. He likely still is. Brian, Larry, Ross and I set out that weekend to find this murderer of our

friend. That's how we referred to him. We looked in every driveway for a car with damage to the front fender or grille. In the year since I had moved here, Chateauguay had grown, there were more cars, more people watching us – "What the hell do you think you're doing?" – "Qu'est-ce-que vous faites-la?" We got a lot of that. Almost every car was banged up in some way – the people here seemed to be pretty bad drivers all-round. My father was a policeman, a CPR cop, and a good one. I pleaded with him to go to the local detachment and just ask.

He went all right and came back shaking his head. "The Chateauguay Police department is all of four constables, one of them is seventy-one. We wouldn't hire him to guard an empty boxcar."

"But there must be a detective or some investigator?"

"Look'it," he said quietly. "I didn't want to tell you but they said it was partly Gordie's fault…"

"What!?"

"He didn't have a light on the bike. His white cap was in his backpack. And he was in his dark blue uniform…just like you are now."

I looked down and for the first time in three days realized I was still wearing my Sea Scouts uniform.

"Maybe a sense of guilt will get to this guy and he'll step up. In the meantime, you've got to get through this." He paused. "Listen, when I was in the war my best friend was a guy named Philip, from New Brunswick. We'd been to boot camp together, landed in Sicily together. We were making our way north through Italy just behind the front lines. Philip was walking beside me. The next second, he was gone. A sniper's bullet…right through his head. Poof. Just like that. I know you're younger and it's hard. All I can tell you is life isn't always fair." He put his hand on my shoulder: "You'd better go have a shower, son."

As I got up to leave I turned to him: "Did you get the sniper?"

"Yeah, I did."

I went to the bathroom, took off my uniform. I realized why all of us were doing this, why I was doing it – because I couldn't face the prospect of staring at this horror in my life. Of being quiet and alone - again. I turned on the shower and washed myself down.

On Monday, October 12th, the *Montreal Gazette* had a report on page three on the death toll from the weekend's traffic accidents. The most spectacular crash was featured with a photograph of a shredded automobile, the result of a head-on collision which killed three. Mercifully, the other accidents were not accompanied by photographs. Just a succinct reporting of the facts:

Gordon Strickland, 12, was killed Friday night at Chateauguay Heights as he cycled home from a meeting of his Sea Scout Troop. The driver of the car failed to stop.

I thought about phoning the reporter and telling him: You got it all wrong. The driver is a killer and he's not being hunted. He could do it again. And Gordon wasn't just twelve. He was a quarterback with one leg! And he could sail a boat with one leg. And he could ride a bike with one leg. Just not forever.

Gordie's funeral was on the Tuesday. Larry, Brian, Ross, Skip and I carried his coffin. It was as light as air. St.Andrew's Church was packed. All the kids from the school, the Sea Scout crew, and the adults, parents and friends, filled the sanctuary. All these people had come to honour a twelve-year old boy. What had he done in his short life to have brought all these people together?

Gordie's mother was in the front row or at least what was left of her. She was held upright by Aunt Muriel. She was a waif of a thing; pale, all skin and bones, and a look in her eyes that spoke of emptiness. And his father? I was to learn later that he stood at the back of the sanctuary and left before we carried out the coffin. It seemed that even in death he did not want to be recognized as the father of such a boy. If only I could have told him what he had missed.

We carried Gordie out, placed him in the hearse and walked beside it as it drove slowly along the river road to the cemetery. We carried him up the slope to his grave. We buried him.

When it was done, Skip collected the Sea Scout crew together. "It's October," he said, "and the wind will be tough but I think we should go for a sail. What do y'a say?" There was no argument from any of us.

An hour later we were rowing downstream to Lac St. Louis. The Empress had been upgraded a bit with an outboard motor but we voted not to use it. We wanted the oars. Keeping time to the current, keeping in time to the rower in front helped to get our minds off Gordie. When we got to open water we unfurled the sail and Skip set a course for the middle of the lake. The wind was brisk and filled the sail.

The Empress, for once, kept a straight course, cutting through the water smoothly. We sat quietly looking out over the lake. Young boys of our age and in that time were not equipped to articulate their innermost feelings. This was long before the days of 'grief counselors'. We didn't have Sartre or Hegel or anyone else to 'formalize' our thoughts of death and dying. We just had each other, our own private thoughts and this boat.

I looked at Skip and saw fathoms of sadness. It was evident he had been crying. I often wondered if somehow he held himself responsible for what had happened. That was, of course, absurd. He knew we needed this time; we needed silence to find out what we were thinking. As we sailed back to the Châteauguay River, the banter started up, the teasing, the yakking, and the lame jokes.

A few weeks later, Skip resigned as Sea Scouts Captain. We could tell in his last weeks that his heart wasn't in it. Over the years while I lived in Châteauguay I would see him on the street and we'd stop and chat and he would ask how the crew was doing. I told him and he would smile with each little victory. But there was a darkness over him that I could not touch. He would walk away, his head down, his shoulders hunched. Gone was the booming voice -

"Hard to starboard!" "Oars Up! - gone was the wind blowing through his hair.

We didn't play football that autumn. That definitely was not in us. I missed going to Gordie's house, bringing him his homework, going through his books, his maps and peering through the telescope at the stars. Several times I did go to the snow-covered football pitch. I visualized the plays we ran, the catches, the tackles, the joy of going home covered in dirt and grass stains. One evening in the middle of January I stood by the field and realized Gordie's house had gone dark. Aunt Muriel had left. The house had been sold.

I carried on with Sea Scouts and learned valuable lessons: how start a campfire in the middle of winter; how to sail a boat; how to tie knots; and

how to work cooperatively. I'm not sure if it taught us how to deal with death but I think by being together and doing these things kept our minds focused on the river ahead. Larry, Brian, Ross and I remained close friends throughout high school. Although we never talked about it much, we did feel the empty space between us that could not be filled – Gordie's space. Whenever we went off on our bikes past the village and along the river road, we would stop at the cemetery and stand silently at his grave.

On the day in September 1965 when I moved out of my parents' home, I packed my things into a van and before taking the highway into Montréal I drove to the cemetery. It had taken a few years but finally Gordie's tombstone had been chiseled:

Seward Gordon Strickland

June 11, 1947 – October 9, 1959

I spoke to him: I didn't know where I would end up or whether I would ever come back but I told him I would never forget him.

I am standing now where I stood then. I told Gordie of my travels over the previous forty-two years. Then I glanced over and saw that something had changed. On the tombstone next to Gordie's was written:

William 'Skip' Yarnell

1918-1982

Had Skip selected this place to be buried because he wanted to make sure that if he couldn't have protected Gordie in this life maybe he could protect in whatever was the next? I don't know. But it sure felt better to see them side-by-side, maybe looking out for each other.

I'd be lying if I said that I think about Gordie every day. The truth is for long periods of time I never think about him at all and only did when some events triggers my memories. One of those days was June, 22nd, 1980 when Terry Fox came to town.

Like everyone else I had read about Terry Fox's cross-country Marathon of Hope to raise funds for cancer research and I had seen the television reports of Fox's jogging style - that distinctive hop-skip-hop. He was, on one leg, at a twenty-six grueling miles a day, slowly making his way across the country. When he reached Québec however, the reception was hardly a warm one. Crowds were small, he had no police escort on the highways, and as a result there were several incidents when drivers tried to run him off the road. What was it, I thought, about a person with one leg that got some people so riled up, practically homicidal?

From the balcony of my second-storey apartment overlooking St.Urbain Street a thin line of people stood on the sidewalks on both sides of the road. I heard voices in the crowd: "Il arrive! Il arrive!" From the crest of the slope a few blocks away a police car emerged, red light flashing, followed by a white van. Then he appeared. His pace was relentless and within a few minutes he was directly below me: the

steely eyes focusing straight ahead; sweat soaking his T-shirt and shorts; his shoulders and arms moving in lock-step to his pace; the gait, the hop-skip-hop, hop-skip-hop, hop-skip-hop; and that magical millisecond – his left foot off the ground, suspending him for an instant, free of the earth. I had seen this before. I thought of Cassius in *Julius Ceasar*: " *'Tis Cinna. I do know him by his gait. He is a friend.*"

The crowd erupted in applause, some cheered. But he continued on without hesitation in an inexorable struggle with his body and the disease that would ultimately take him. I cannot confess that Terry Fox looked up at me in the hero's glance, so intent he was on the road ahead. But I will say that in Fox's gait I saw my friend in that millisecond when he was floating above the earth, in a freedom that only he could feel, in a pain that only he would endure.

I thought about Gordie long and hard in those moments, thinking that had he lived he would have a prosthetic leg by now and that he would likely be jogging alongside Terry Fox. And I did imagine that if he were down there jogging past me, he would have looked up at me and shouted, "*Next time, tackle me!*"

Next Time, Tackle Me

Richard Stanford

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into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means
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Next Time, Tackle Me

Richard Stanford, When I'm not writing short stories and essays or producing documentary films in Montréal, I can be found mucking about in my gardens trying to create the perfect eggplant.

RICHARD STANFORD